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AUTHOR Harvancik, Mark
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ABSTRACT

Information regarding the dynamics of incestuous families is greatly needed as long as misconceptions hamper attempts at prevention and intervention. Helping professionals need to be aware of the prevalence of incest, to be able to identify victims, and to devise therapeutic approaches to help both victim and offender. This study examined the incidence of incest. Subjects (n=135) were female college freshmen ranging in age from 18 to 53. A questionnaire about incestuous relationships was completed by the subjects after they were assured of anonymity and confidentiality. Approximately 24%, or 32 respondents, had experienced an incestuous relationship. In 21 of the 32 cases, victimization (defined as the use of overt or covert force or an age difference of 10 years or greater) was used. In 17 cases force was used, in 13 cases the age difference was 10 years or greater, and in 9 cases force and age differences were both present. The remaining 11 experiences could have been experimentation or instances outside the criteria. The degree of trauma was related to the degree of control exerted on the perceived victim. Trauma resulting from an experience involving victimization is compounded by multiple experiences. This research points to the need to publicize that incest does exist, and to create an environment in which victims can feel more secure in seeking assistance. (ABL)

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Dynamics of Father-Daughter Incestuous
Experiences of College Undergraduates

Mark Harvancik
Adams State College

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Dynamics of Father-Daughter Incestuous
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Information regarding the dynamics of incestuous families is, and will continue to be, greatly needed as long as misconceptions cloud this issue and hamper attempts at prevention and intervention. Considering the trauma and longlasting effects an incestuous episode could have on an individual, helping professionals and educators need to be aware of the prevalence of incest, act to institute preventative measures, educate both children and adults regarding sexual abuse, and devise therapeutic approaches to help both victim and offender. Also, the related issue of identification is of great importance, not only for helping professionals, but for anyone that comes into contact with children and therefore has the potential opportunity of putting an end to an incestuous relationship.

A further need for research of the "incest taboo" concerns the issue of reporting. As the body of knowledge and public awareness increases through education, the chance that individuals will be more likely to discuss their experiences also tends to increase. The key is that when an individual becomes aware that others share similar problems the likelihood of this problem being revealed is increased. Increased reporting serves to provide a larger and more accurate pool of

information while at the same time increasing the visibility and awareness of the issue.

For purposes of clarification two terms, incest and victimization, need to be elaborated on further. In this article incest is defined as "that abuse which is perpetrated on a child by a member of that child's family group and includes not only sexual intercourse, but also any act designed to stimulate a child sexually, or to use a child for sexual stimulation, either of the perpetrator or of another person" (National Center on Child Abuse and Neglect, 1976). The term victimization is used in this article to pertain to an incestuous act in which one person used either overt or covert force to get another person to comply with his/her wishes, or, an incestuous act in which one person was significantly older (ten years or greater) than the other person.

Specific to this article is the issue of whether participants experienced incestuous relationships and whether victimization or experimentation was involved. As mentioned previously, the determination of victimization is based on the presence of force and/or a significant age disparity between persons involved. Please keep in mind that there may be other indicators of victimization which were not used for this study, perhaps giving cause for underreporting of the actual prevalence of incestuous experiences involving victimization. Considering the potential for trauma for victims, emphasis needs to be focused on the identification of victims of incest realizing that the trauma experienced tends to be increased based on the presence of force and/or age disparity. In both situations trauma tends to result because

one person, the offender, has substantial power and control over another person, the victim, and the degree trauma is experienced appears to be proportional to the degree of control and power exhibited by the offender.

METHOD

Participants

The subjects for this study were determined via a cluster random sampling of classes offered at a small southwestern college.

Participants were females ($N=135$) enrolled in one of fifteen selected classes, classes available during the Spring semester of 1985.

Participants included all four classes of undergraduates ranging in age from 18 to 53 ($X=23.18$).

Procedure

To obtain data for this study a derivation of the questionnaire designed by Finkelhor (1979) was administered to potential participants. The last fifteen minutes of classtime were allocated for the survey procedure. All males as well as any females who had already completed a survey were dismissed from the class. The remaining females were given questionnaires and then the issues of confidentiality and anonymity were discussed in great detail, reassuring potential participants of the steps taken to insure their safety in responding. Directions available in the

first two pages of the questionnaire were also discussed as well as their option to participate. On completion, participants placed their questionnaires in a common envelope and then questionnaires for all classes were combined before analysis began.

RESULTS

The objective of this study was to determine whether incestuous relationships had occurred and if so, whether these relationships involved victimization or experimentation. Of the 135 participants in this study, 32 (23.70%) indicated participation in at least one incestuous experience. Table 1 indicates that 21 of the 32 reported incestuous experiences were cases of victimization based on present criteria. In 17 cases some type of force was used by the offender to compel the victim to participate, in 13 cases an age disparity between victim and offender was equal to or greater than ten years, and in nine cases both force and age disparity were factors. The remaining 11 participants who reported incestuous experiences could have been cases involving experimentation or instances of victimization not tapped by the present criteria.

Other areas revealed in this study involve number of experiences, duration, ages, and whether the experience(s) were revealed to anyone. The average number of experiences for those persons considered to be victimized was 2.58 (range= 1-8) and the median duration of the relationships was 30 days (range= 1-3650). In cases of victimization

the average age of victims was 8.76 and the average age of offenders was 32.10. Finally, concerning whether the victim revealed the incestuous experience to anyone, 78.95% never revealed their experience(s) and 21.05% revealed their experience(s) to their mothers.

DISCUSSION

It has been established that 32 out of 135 participants had experienced at least one incestuous experience or one out of every four participants experienced incest. Perhaps more importantly, 21 of the 32 participants that experienced an incestuous relationship(s) were victimized. The importance lies in the degree of trauma experienced. Experimentation may very well be a natural part of development and probably does not have trauma associated with it. However, in 21 instances either force or age disparity provided the fuel for trauma. As indicated previously, the presence of either covert or overt force and/or a situation in which one person is significantly older than the other person, tends to increase the trauma proportionally. In both instances the degree of control exerted on the perceived victim determines the extent of trauma experienced. To compound the trauma experienced victims of incestuous relationships averaged 2.58 experiences and the median duration was 30 days. The implication is that the trauma experienced from one experience involving victimization is compounded with multiple experiences. Therefore, it becomes increasingly important to not only identify potential victims of abuse, but to also identify present victims of incest. In the case of present victims, the earlier

relationships are discovered and terminated the earlier the effects of the trauma experienced can be curtailed. This is a difficult task considering that 78.95% of victims had never revealed their experiences to anyone.

When one considers the conflicts in reporting of incestuous relationships and the unwillingness of victims in reporting their experiences because of the trauma associated with it, the need for revealing of possible characteristics can be beneficial. Considering the extent experienced trauma can have on victims, it can be of great help to victims who have not revealed their experiences to know that others have gone through similar experiences and have dealt with them effectively. In particular, exploring experiences in group settings such as those mentioned by Gordy (1983) can again convey the fact that the victim is not alone, that others have experienced similar traumas.

Research of this nature serves a critical function in that once again incestuous experiences have been detected and victimization exists. This however, is not sufficient. To fully appreciate the relevance of this and other similar studies, we must use this information to further publicize that incest does exist, design programs to further educate individuals about this taboo, and to create an environment in which persons can feel more secure in seeking assistance for their concerns. Integral to this process for helping professionals is recognition of the amount of trauma experienced and how this trauma may increase in proportion to the amount of power/control the offender exercises over the victim. Also, when one considers that many persons

do not reveal their experiences, reveal their experiences and are not beleived, or reveal their experiences only after an extended period of time, it becomes increasingly apparent as to the need for an environment in which both helping professionals and clients can approach this area in as effective manner as possible.

Trauma, whether due to the presence of force, age disparity, or any other factors, can have a very devastating effect on the victim. The effects can remain for a lifetime or can be dealt with once the victim feels safe enough to seek assistance. This reemphasizes the need for information, support groups, workshops, media materials, etc., so that victims can see that they are not alone and that there are services tailored to assist them with their special concerns. As helping professionals we need to convey the message that the "incest taboo" is no longer to be dealt with behind closed doors, accepted by some families, but rather that it is an atrocious act with devastating consequences to the victim and will not be tolerated.

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